THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Katie Fforde

In a city full of dreams,
will she find her own?

From London with Love

About Katie

'I live in the beautiful Cotswold countryside with my family, and I'm a country girl at heart.

I first started writing when my mother gave me a writing kit for Christmas, and once I started I just couldn't stop. *Living Dangerously* was my first novel and since then I haven't looked back.

Ideas for books are everywhere, and I'm constantly inspired by the people and places around me. From watching TV (yes, it is research) to overhearing conversations, I love how my writing gives me the chance to taste other people's lives and try all the jobs I've never had.

Each of my books explores a different profession or background and my research has helped me bring these to life. I've been a porter in an auction house, tried my hand at pottery, refurbished furniture, delved behind the scenes of a dating website, and I've even been on a Ray Mears survival course.

I love being a writer; to me there isn't a more satisfying and pleasing thing to do. I particularly enjoy writing love stories. I believe falling in love is the best thing in the world, and I want all my characters to experience it, and my readers to share their stories.'

Keep in touch with Katie.

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For my family, including those who weren't living with me during the writing of this book.

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Author's Note

It is important to note that this book is set between 1968 and 1969 when there were no rules about mudlarking. Today you cannot do it without a licence, not even if you go with an experienced mudlarker.

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Chapter One

London, Autumn 1968

'Are you sure you don't want me to come in with you?' said David.

Félicité smiled and put her hand over David's. She looked on him as a sort of uncle, always there, always supportive but sometimes a little over-protective.

'I want to do this on my own. She's my mother, after all, even if she didn't really bring me up.' They were sitting in the car outside an imposing house in Cheyne Walk in Chelsea, which, Félicité had been told, was a very smart area of London. The house they were looking at had three storeys and an imposing front door. Félicité was not surprised to find her mother living in a house like this.

'Well, don't let her try to improve you,' David said. 'You're perfect as you are. And particularly don't let her try and get rid of your French accent. It's charming.'

Félicité was startled. 'I haven't got a French accent, have I?'

'It's very faint. You've been brought up in France, been to school there. It's inevitable.'

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Félicité was still slightly affronted. 'I thought I spoke perfect English.'

'You do, darling!' Félicité got the impression that David wished he'd never mentioned her accent. He turned to face her. 'And don't be surprised if she's jealous of you. You are extremely pretty – beautiful even. Hardly surprising given your parents. But Lucinda may not like it. She may feel threatened.'

Félicité was aware she was nice to look at – she received enough male attention from her schoolmates to tell her that – but the thought that her mother might be jealous of her looks didn't seem credible. She wasn't that impressed with them herself. Her shoulder-length hair, for example, was neither blonde, after her mother, nor dark, after her father. Instead, it was a sort of caramel colour. She did at least have her father's dark eyes but she felt they didn't go with the shade of her hair. She was fairly tall and slim, which was good. David had once said she had a retroussé nose, which, it turned out, meant it turned up a bit. She didn't usually give much thought to her appearance, but she knew her mother would be looking at her critically. She hoped she would pass her mother's assessment.

'I'm sure I'll be fine,' she said. 'I'm going in now. And yes, I know you'll pick me up again if I'm unhappy in any way. But I won't be! Lexi says that London is a wonderful city and I'll meet good friends at my secretarial course.'

David sighed. 'Alexandra was born here. It was different for her—'

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'Goodbye, darling David.' She kissed his cheek. 'I'll write to you all very soon.'

She got out of the car and, surrounded by her suitcases, rang the doorbell.

It was opened almost immediately by a middle-aged woman in a black dress with a white apron. She wore a lace-edged cap and had an air of suppressed resentment.

'Felicity, darling!' said Lucinda, her mother, coming down the stairs behind the woman. 'I thought you'd never get here and that David must have got lost. Come in. Anna, can you bring in the cases?'

Félicité brought in the biggest case herself. She hadn't realised there'd be a maid. This trip to stay with her mother suddenly seemed a little more daunting than she'd imagined the visit to 1960s Swinging London would be – the visit that she had been dreaming of for ages.

'Leave that for now,' said Lucinda, who was formally dressed in a skirt and jacket, her blonde hair swept into a chignon. 'Anna will take it to your room. Go and wash your hands and then come through to the drawing room.'

Félicité didn't consider herself to be biddable but somehow found herself doing exactly as her mother asked. In her home in Provence, where she lived with her father, stepmother and various siblings, she was a confident young woman. Here she felt shy of the beautiful mother she hardly ever saw, and cold in the chilly England of late October.

There was a bright coal fire burning in the fireplace of the elegant drawing room, however.

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'Come and sit by the fire, darling,' said her mother, handing Félicité a glass of brown liquid in a small glass. 'It's too late for tea. That's sherry. Learn to like it. It's an English custom.'

Félicité sipped it. It was very dry and she didn't like the taste, but she did like the warming effect it had on her as she swallowed.

'Talking of English things,' said Lucinda. 'One, I think you should be called Felicity in the English way while you're here. Two, I'd prefer you to call me Mummy, not Maman. Three, if you could get rid of that affected French accent, I'd be grateful.'

Félicité took another sip of the unwelcoming sherry. She'd hardly opened her mouth since she'd arrived and already her mother was criticising the way she spoke. 'I'll do my best with my accent,' she said, deliberately sounding even more French, 'and I don't mind being called Felicity in the English way, but I would struggle with Mummy.'

Lucinda sighed. 'I'm going to have to work hard on you to get rid of the hoydenish habits your stepmother has obviously encouraged.'

Félicité smiled and finished her drink.

Shortly afterwards, Anna showed Félicité the little bedroom at the back of the house assigned to her and then left her alone to change for dinner. They were expecting a guest, and Félicité was sure it would be a man. Her mother was rarely without a male companion. As she shook out one of the stylish dresses her maternal grandmother (who lived the life of a Frenchwoman)

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had bought for her in Paris, Félicité hoped that David was wrong, and that her mother wouldn't feel remotely threatened. Her dresses were elegant, but they weren't quite what young women were wearing in London these days. They covered her knees for one thing.

However, she felt confident in her appearance when she went through to the drawing room later.

As she'd predicted, there was a man holding a glass of something Félicité presumed was whisky.

'Gerald,' said Lucinda. 'Let me introduce you to my daughter, Felicity.'

Gerald inspected Félicité from head to toe and then said, 'My, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, does it? She is the image of you, Lucy, and could be your sister!'

Lucinda smiled. 'You flatter me, Gerry, but thank you. Felicity? Come and tell Gerald about your life in the chateau.'

'The chateau?' said Gerald. 'Does that mean your papa is rich?'

Félicité was inwardly shocked by this directness but managed a shrug in reply. '*Pas du tout*,' she said. 'I mean, not at all. But the chateau is beautiful and Provence is beautiful too.'

'And stuck in the middle of nowhere, how boring!' said Lucinda. 'Apart from the scenery, which I admit is rather lovely.'

'It's not so far from the Riviera,' said Félicité, sticking up for her home territory. 'And Paris is easily accessible.' She had overheard her grandmother use this phrase at a dinner party; it seemed a good time to introduce it.

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Lucinda smiled. 'I must admit my mother has done a very good job buying you some clothes. Had you had to rely on your stepmother for guidance, God knows what you'd have looked like.'

'You have a stepmother?' asked Gerald. 'Do you hate her? Is she wicked?'

'*Pas du tout*,' Félicité said again. She was feeling more and more prickly as the minutes ticked by. It was going to be difficult to enjoy herself in London if this was how it was going to be. But Alexandra, her 'wicked stepmother', had assured her that once she met other girls her own age, she would be fine.

'Her wickedness may be hampered by the two brats she's just given birth to,' said Lucinda.

'The twins are one now,' Félicité retorted.

'And then there's the little one, Stéphie. Quite sweet but possibly not all that bright,' said Lucinda. 'My ex-husband, the Comte, took her in for some reason.'

'She is fourteen now, Maman,' said Félicité.

Lucinda sighed. 'Can't you manage to call me Mummy?'

'No!' said Gerald. 'Maman is charming.' He shot a glance at Lucinda. 'Having a French daughter is much more exotic than having just another lumpy schoolgirl with incipient spots and body odour.'

Lucinda laughed. 'Now you put it like that, Gerald, I agree. No one could call Felicity lumpy, and her skin is good.'

Félicité realised that Lucinda seemed to be warming towards her being French, which was a relief, as she

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had no idea how to be anything else, but she resented being discussed as if she wasn't present.

'Ah, we're embarrassing the poor girl,' said Gerald. 'Let's talk about something else. Lucy, you went to the theatre last night? How was the play?'

Félicité was very tired by the time she was finally allowed to go to bed. Anna had cooked dinner and apparently cleared and washed it up as well. Félicité felt bad about this and resolved to be more helpful once she was used to her surroundings.

She had been told that although her mother rented most of the house, there was an apartment at the top inhabited by the god-daughter of the house's owner, who lived abroad.

'We'll invite her for drinks soon,' Lucinda had said at the end of the evening. 'Now you have a good night's sleep. Your course starts tomorrow. I'll take you there. It's not far and we can walk.'

When Félicité inserted herself between the tightly tucked sheets, she remembered her stepmother's fondness for hot-water bottles: she would definitely have put one in the bed. But she hardly had time to feel the cold before she was asleep.

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Chapter Two

Dear Daddy,

Well, here I am, sitting in Athene's flat. She met me at Waterloo and we came here in a taxi, although there are lots of buses and of course the underground. I'm sure I'll find my way round on public transport very soon. Her flat is very like she is: elegant, stylish and a little bit flamboyant. She really is the best godmother anyone could ever have. She has left clothes for me to wear if I want to, as well as some – how do I put it – that have obviously been left behind by some of her gentlemen friends. She fully expects me to have gentlemen callers, as she refers to them. But don't worry, I can't imagine that happening – for a while anyway.

There are two bedrooms, one quite small, which I shall use as a spare room, but the other has a huge double bed in it. I shall be very comfortable in there.

Athene told me about a little delicatessen which is quite near, and a wine shop, although she's left me lots of wine and a well-stocked drinks cabinet and she says I must drink it all!

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I have a lovely view of the river from the window in the sitting room. I think Athene has been very clever making such a nice flat out of what are really the servants' quarters. The woman downstairs, who I haven't met yet, has a Hungarian refugee working for her.

I have a map how to find the bookshop. I'm not starting work for a couple of days so I'll make sure I know where it is before I do. I'm not sure what I'm going to be doing there but the pay seems generous. I'm not sure I'll ever be a proper Town Mouse, but maybe I won't be such a Country one from now on.

So, from London with Love!

Violet xxx

Three weeks had passed since she wrote that letter, and Violet was aware that the rather snooty woman who lived in the main house now had a much younger woman staying with her. She'd seen the car, parked a little way down the road, and had seen a tall man get out and retrieve cases from the boot. She'd also seen their fond hug when they parted. Could he have been her father? Anna, the maid, had fed her other snippets of information as Violet passed through the kitchen on the way to the servants' staircase which led to her flat at the top of the house.

Thus, she was not entirely surprised when a very pretty girl came out of the main entrance of the house at the same time as her a couple of days later.

'Good morning!' said Violet. She had lived almost

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all her life in the country, and saying 'good morning' to everyone was natural to her.

Violet couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for this girl. She hadn't met her downstairs neighbour properly, who she knew was called Lucinda, but she hadn't seemed very friendly on the couple of occasions that they'd encountered each other. If this girl had Lucinda for a mother, she might not be enjoying life in London.

'*Bon* – er, good morning!' said the girl.

'I'm Violet. I live in the flat at the top of the house.'

'Félicité – I mean Felicity now I'm in England. I'm staying with my mother in the bottom half of the house.'

'It's very nice to meet you.' Violet smiled. 'I'm on my way to work,' she continued. 'Do you know where you're going?'

'I think so. I went there yesterday with my mother. It's a secretarial college.'

Violet nodded. 'I know it. I pass it on my way. We can go together?'

Felicity smiled in agreement and they set off, walking side by side down the pavement.

'I'm not accustomed to living in London – or any city,' said Felicity.

'Nor me!' said Violet. 'I wouldn't be in London if my godmother hadn't practically dragged me out of my house in the country!' She laughed. 'She meant well, of course. It is a huge house, and it's practically falling down. There were reasons I had to move out.' Violet still wondered if she'd done the right thing though. But her godmother had insisted. And as her good

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friend Jenny – who was a bit older than her but a very close friend – had also gone to live in France, staying there would have been very difficult.

'That sounds like my home in France! I mean with it being huge and falling down a little bit. Although my home is full of people.' Felicity sighed, giving Violet the impression she was homesick.

Violet was usually fairly shy but at thirty she felt it was her duty to be friendly to this girl who not only sounded French, but looked it too. Her clothes were so elegant. Next to her, Violet felt a bit frumpy, although she knew her new chin-length page-boy haircut suited her, even if it was plain brown. And she'd been surprised by how her fringe had drawn attention to her green eyes, which she now emphasised with eyeliner and mascara, using a technique learnt from a magazine.

'So have you come to London to learn shorthand and typing?' Violet asked.

'Yes. And to live with my mother, of course. She didn't bring me up, my father did. But now she wants me with her.'

'Did you want to come?'

'Partly. I wanted to spend time in Swinging London.' Felicity laughed. 'I don't think it swings in this part of it.'

Violet joined in the laughter. 'To be honest, I haven't seen anything remotely swinging since I've been here.'

'My stepmother says I should visit the King's Road? Which is not far from here?'

'That's right. Also Carnaby Street.'

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'Would you show me one day? My stepmother – Alexandra – said I'd meet nice girls on my course but so far, I haven't met anyone. They all wear clothes like their mothers wear and stare at me because I'm foreign.'

'You haven't been there long,' said Violet, trying to sound encouraging. 'There may be some super girls you just haven't met yet. But of course I'll come with you to visit Carnaby Street. We could go on the bus together.'

Felicity paused. 'Have you met my mother? Formally, I mean?'

'No,' said Violet.

'We must arrange it. She's very fussy about who I meet. She says she's arranging a tea party with suitable friends for me. I'll ask her to invite you too.'

'She might not think I'm suitable,' said Violet.

'She will. Your accent is appropriate and as you live in the same house as we do, your address must be too!'

They both laughed again. 'I look forward to the invitation,' Violet told her. 'You'll find me at the top of the servants' stairs. Now, you go down there, I think, while I go along to the main road.'

Violet thought about Felicity as she continued her journey. Poor girl, coming from a house full of people to a formal, elegant house with a woman who appeared just as formal and elegant.

But as she neared the old print and antiquarian bookshop where she worked, she wondered if today was the day that she would finally meet her boss.

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Whenever she thought about the mystery boss she remembered her first day at the shop.

She'd been asked to arrive at eleven and as she neared the shop a man came out of it and got into a taxicab. The cab was full of suitcases and the man was wearing a rather dashing fedora and trench coat.

By the time she reached the shop the taxi had disappeared; nor was her new boss anywhere to be seen, and no one mentioned him as they welcomed her, apart from one person awkwardly explaining that her boss was away and no one knew when he would be back.

And now, three weeks later, there was still no sign of him. She couldn't help wondering if the man who'd been so eager to leave the shop was indeed her boss, but she couldn't quite bring herself to ask anyone.

While her colleagues were obviously used to working without him, none of them knew quite what to do with Violet. So, to keep herself busy, she tackled a huge pile of filing that seemed to have been neglected for years, looked through books of old prints and familiarised herself with the stock. She also took the office dog for long walks. He belonged to one of the partners but accepted exercise and biscuits from anyone. Violet liked exploring London as well as the canine company. There was a heap of smelly spaniels at home with her father, and she missed them.

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Chapter Three

Felicity was still feeling homesick. She hadn't found anyone on her course she could think of as a friend. There was an older group of girls who took their work very seriously and a younger crowd who were just there because their parents had insisted. Felicity didn't know where she belonged really. While she was there because of her mother, she didn't want to waste her time: if she was going to be miserable, she wanted to have something to show for it.

Since Felicity's first night on Sunday, her mother had been out every evening, and Felicity spent the time writing long letters home. But when she read them over before putting them in an envelope, she realised she'd have to rewrite them. If David caught a glimpse of one that said how dowdy her companions were and how chilly her mother was, he'd get in his enormous old Volvo and come to carry her back to Provence in days. And in spite of her loneliness, Felicity didn't want that.

Her mother was at the theatre yet again – with a man who wasn't Gerald – and on this particular night, she finally wrote a letter she was happy with, so she

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put on her coat to go and post it. Her mother had provided her with sheets of stamps and had told her how many of them she'd need to put on the envelope, and so she was all set for a little walk in the dark to post it.

Although the pillar box (as she had discovered it was called) was only at the end of the road, Felicity felt quite brave as she put the house key in her pocket and set out. She experienced a frisson of fear that was almost pleasurable. Mist from the river had crept up into the nearby streets, it was dark and the light from the street lamp made Felicity feel as if she was in a film.

She was on her way to the pillar box when a tall dark figure appeared out of the fog. She could barely hold back a scream as she pressed herself against the wall to get out of his way.

'Oh, I'm so sorry, did I frighten you?' The figure stopped walking.

Felicity recognised an upper-class twang in the figure's voice. He had the kind of accent her mother definitely approved of.

'Yes!' she said. 'You loomed up at me out of the fog. Oh,' she went on as he came nearer the light. 'You're covered in mud!'

'Yes, damn it,' he said. 'I fell over.' He smiled. 'Worse, someone has stolen my bike.'

'That's awful!'

'Well, it's inconvenient, but I originally found it in the river and repaired it, so it probably wasn't really mine to begin with.'

Felicity was aware she was enjoying talking to someone roughly her own age who was, she could see

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now, extremely good-looking. 'Don't you say "finders keepers"? My stepmother told me it is an English expression.'

'It certainly is!' He laughed again; he seemed a merry person. 'Maybe I should introduce myself. Oliver Ward.'

Felicity hesitated. 'Félicité de Belleville.'

'Oh,' said Oliver. 'You're French?'

'Half French. My mother prefers me to be called Felicity now I'm living with her.'

'Where did you live before? With your father?' Oliver seemed happy to ignore being covered in mud.

'In Provence, in France. And yes, with my father.'

Oliver nodded. 'Do you live nearby? Here in London, I mean.'

'Very near. I've just come out to post a letter.'

'I live on a barge. Upriver from here.'

'Oh! That sounds – romantic.'

Oliver was amused. 'It probably sounds more romantic than it is. She's called *Our Nora*. But houses are easier.'

'Perhaps,' she said. Felicity had been inspecting Oliver during their conversation and the more she saw of him the more she liked him, in spite of him being covered in mud.

'Listen – Felicity.' Oliver suddenly seemed a little nervous. 'Would it be possible for you to give me your telephone number? I'd like to ring you up, maybe take you out one day? I promise you I can look quite respectable.' He paused. 'I hate the thought of saying goodbye and never seeing you again.'

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Felicity hesitated. Was it de rigueur to go out with young men you met in the street? What would her mother say, for example?

'I was on my way to a party tonight,' Oliver went on. 'A party I should certainly have attended, only I was lured on to the riverbank and now of course I can't go.'

'Will there be consequences?'

Oliver nodded. 'Alas, yes. But it can't be helped. If I went back to the barge to change now it would be too late to get to the party. I haven't got a bike, and I don't have enough money to take a taxi.'

'I have money. I could give – lend—'

'No!' said Oliver firmly. 'I may be a bit of a harum scarum but I haven't yet sunk to borrowing money from girls – especially ones I don't really know.'

'Is everything all right?' called a female voice. 'Is that you, Felicity?'

It was Violet. She was walking towards them looking stern, Felicity realised, and possibly a bit protective.

'Everything is fine!' said Felicity, quick to reassure her. 'Oliver here has fallen in the mud and now can't go to an important party.'

'It's perfectly all right. Worse things happen,' said Oliver.

'Do you know Oliver?' Violet went on.

'We've just met,' said Felicity.

'I scared Felicity,' Oliver explained. 'I appeared out of the fog like some sort of creature from a fairy tale. And not a happy one.'

Violet laughed and Felicity, relieved, realised she had been willing her to approve of her new friend.

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'That is unfortunate,' said Violet. 'Can anything be done about your party?'

'I don't think so,' said Oliver. 'I live in Chiswick. I can't go home and get back in time.'

'But it is only mud,' said Violet. 'I'm used to dealing with mud. I come from the country. Why don't you come to my flat and we'll see what we can do.'

'Oh, what a good idea!' said Felicity. 'My mother is out and I couldn't invite you back to our part – it's the same house,' she explained to Oliver, who seemed confused.

'But I must post my letter first,' said Violet.

'I came to post a letter too,' said Felicity. 'I can take them both.' Violet handed her the envelope she had been holding. 'Oh, it's to France! My letter is also to France!'

Then, thinking it might be considered rude to read the envelope of a letter you were posting for someone else, she ran along the road to the pillar box. When she had arrived in London she had been excited to see her first red box that was used to collect letters in. At home, in France, they gave the letters to the *facteur* when he came with that day's post.

Soon the three of them were walking back along Cheyne Walk to the house where Violet and Felicity both lived.

'Actually,' said Oliver, 'it's unlikely you can do anything about the mud – it probably needs to dry first – but if I may be allowed to use the telephone, I can at least make my excuses to the hostess of the party. Then not appearing wouldn't be quite so rude.'

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He didn't seem entirely convinced but neither Felicity nor Violet commented and soon they were climbing up the stairs to Violet's flat at the top of the house.

A few minutes later Oliver was standing in the small hallway, obviously aware of just how dirty he was. He took off his shoes.

'Maybe take off your coat as well?' Felicity suggested.

'That's a good idea,' Violet agreed. 'But it's your trousers that are the muddiest.'

'I'm not taking those off,' said Oliver.

Violet paused. 'There is a very splendid man's dressing gown in among the clothes that my godmother left here. Would you take off your trousers if you could put that on?'

Oliver considered. 'Is it very flamboyant?'

'I'm afraid it is.'

'In which case, I'd be delighted.'

Violet left Felicity and Oliver to fetch the dressing gown and he smiled at her, somewhat awkward. 'I wish we could have met in more auspicious circumstances.'

'Why?'

'Because you're not going to like a boy who looks like a mudlark, which in fact is exactly what I am.'

'What's a mudlark? Is that something only English people can be?'

'I doubt it but here it means I go on to the shoreline of the Thames when I can and find long-forgotten treasures. Sadly, it almost always involves getting filthy and I shouldn't have been so foolish as to attempt it when I was on my way to a party.'

'So why did you?' asked Felicity.

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'There was a low tide. I couldn't resist. I'm a fool.'

Violet came back. She had a dressing gown over her arm and something in a dry cleaner's bag. 'I found a few things. I'm going to leave them with you here, Oliver. The bathroom is through there. And now I'm going to make us a hot drink and a snack. Felicity?'

Violet ushered Felicity into the sitting room. There was a window that looked over the rooftops. 'Oh! You can see the river!' said Felicity. 'It's so near!'

'It is. My godmother chose the best part for herself to live in, which is up here.' She paused. 'Are you hungry? Have you had supper?'

Felicity shook her head. 'My mother has gone out for the evening and told me to make myself something. She would have asked Anna to do it but I'm perfectly capable of making an omelette.' She smiled. 'I'm half French, after all.'

'Let's go into the kitchen and see what we can find,' said Violet.

'This is what an estate agent would describe as compact and bijou,' said Violet when the two of them were side by side in a space about the width of a railway carriage. 'The larder at home is bigger than this. I don't really think it is designed to cook in, merely to provide suitable canapés to go with cocktails.'

'It seems very small to me, too, but maybe it is big enough for English people? My mother doesn't cook at all.'

'Some of us enjoy cooking, and although it is tiny, I could certainly produce a meal from here if I wanted to.' Violet started opening and shutting cupboard

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doors. She soon produced a packet of tiny biscuits. 'These are my favourites. They're cheesy and salty.' Soon, they were being poured into a dish. 'Would you like a drink?'

'I'd prefer not if it's sherry. I find it very . . . dry.'

'I have wine. My godmother left several bottles and said I should drink them.'

'That was kind.'

'She is, very. Now, if you can open the bottle' – Violet handed Felicity a corkscrew – 'I'll make something more substantial than Cheeselets.'

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Chapter Four

Violet liked cooking and was enjoying the prospect of company. Felicity and Oliver both seemed delightful.

'*Et voilà*,' said Felicity when she had extracted the cork from the bottle. 'If you tell me where I can find glasses, I could pour. We want to drink it now? The wine doesn't need to breathe?'

'It probably should breathe,' said Violet, opening the bread bin and finding a loaf. 'But we definitely want to drink it now. And you do have a very charming accent, if I may say so.'

Oliver, wearing the dressing gown, appeared in the kitchen. 'It is indeed. Very charming.'

Felicity went pink. 'It irritates my mother. I think she prefers not to be reminded that she abandoned us when we were very small – left us living with our papa. Naturally French is my first language.'

'But you speak fluent English,' said Oliver.

'Well, my grandmother is English, of course, but she lives near us in France. She made sure that we spoke English properly. And we had an English nanny.'

'Did you?' said Oliver, obviously intrigued. 'That gives us something in common as I did too. And did

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yours wear a uniform, was very strict and have hairs sprouting from random parts of her face?'

This made Felicity giggle, obviously thinking how unlike her own nanny Oliver's sounded. 'Certainly not! She is very beautiful. Anyway, she wasn't our nanny for long because she married my father.'

'Ah!' said Oliver. 'Even better. You have a wicked stepmother!'

This made Felicity laugh even more. 'Pah! My mother's man friend said more or less the same thing when I first arrived! Why do people keep assuming Alexandra is wicked because she is a stepmother? In fact, she is not at all wicked and is only a few years older than I am. I was far too old to have a nanny when she came.'

Oliver sighed. 'I'm disappointed. I was depending on you to have a stepmother that I could rescue you from. Can I help?' he said to Violet.

Violet handed him an onion, a chopping board and a knife. 'Can you handle onions?'

'Of course.'

'Well done,' said Violet.

'Do give me a job too,' said Felicity. 'What are you making?'

'Welsh rarebit, which is nothing to do with animals, you may be glad to hear. I need breadcrumbs and the bread is too fresh really. The onions are my own variation.'

'I will chop the bread,' said Felicity. 'I know all about Welsh rarebit. When Alexandra first came to us, all there was to eat was stale bread and hard cheese.'

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'That must have been challenging for a young English girl just starting a new job,' said Violet. 'Why was there only bread and cheese?'

Felicity shrugged. 'The housekeeper had left. There was nothing else. And I'm ashamed to say that my brother and I weren't at all helpful.'

'How old were you?' asked Violet.

'Fifteen. My father employed Alexandra for Stéphie really. She's my little sister.'

'How old was she when your nanny arrived?'

'Eight or nine, I think,' said Felicity.

Violet pursed her lips but didn't comment on how young this little girl must have been when her mother left the family. Her own mother had died when she was about that age.

Something in her manner must have indicated how she felt about this because Felicity said, 'Stéphie isn't my real sister. My father adopted her when she was tiny.'

Violet, embarrassed that her disapproval had been evident, smiled awkwardly. 'I'm sorry. I hope I didn't appear judgemental.'

'It is confusing,' said Felicity. 'My brother and I adore her and she feels like a proper sister to us, but Lucinda wasn't her mother.'

Violet smiled. 'I'm glad.'

'My mother isn't very maternal,' Felicity went on. Violet nodded, not wishing to comment. 'Alexandra was very kind to Stéphie. It's what first made me and my brother warm to her.'

'I'm very glad to hear that.' Violet smiled again,

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pleased that Felicity had felt she could confide in her. 'Now I must make toast. I love having a toaster here,' she went on. 'At home we do it under the grill.'

Soon the three of them were sitting round the table, eating and drinking. But the moment Oliver had finished, he got up, obviously feeling awkward.

'Er – Violet?' he said. 'Could I possibly use your telephone? I must tell my hostess that I can't go to their party.'

'But there is a dinner jacket and trousers here that you could borrow—' said Violet.

'It's very kind of you but I looked at them and they are enormous,' Oliver explained. 'Besides, I think the party here is infinitely more enjoyable than the one that I was going to would have been.' He laughed. 'Actually, that's hardly fair. The one I was going to was always going to be grim, full of people my father would like me to mix with.'

'Oh . . .'

'I'll take flowers tomorrow, but I must cancel tonight,' he said.

Violet gestured towards the hallway. 'There's the telephone; please use it.'

When Oliver had telephoned his hostess he returned to the table. 'She was very unhappy with me. As so often is the case, she was short of "debs' delights".' Aware that Felicity was looking blank he went on to explain. 'That means young men of the right age and background to dance with young women who are debutantes.'

'Debutantes are young women of a certain class

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who do "the season",' Violet began to explain, aware how bizarre it must sound to someone who was not familiar with the concept of the tea parties, dances, balls and other entertainments designed so the right young people could meet each other and possibly marry. She cleared her throat before trying to continue her explanation.

'It's all right,' Felicity broke in. 'Alexandra explained all of this to me. My mother would have wanted me to join in, but I didn't like the idea, and my father wasn't in favour. He says he wants me to meet all sorts of people. Besides, I'm going to art school next year. There's no point in meeting my future husband yet.'

'You are very young,' said Violet, suppressing her romantic hopes for Felicity and Oliver. Maybe her own lack of romantic prospects had turned her into a matchmaker. She happened to notice that Oliver, as he refilled the glasses, looked cast down. 'But you should look on this time in London as an opportunity to have fun.'

Felicity nodded. 'That's what Alexandra said.'

Oliver smiled, possibly to hide his feelings. 'I'm still disappointed that your stepmother isn't wicked. Not that I wish you had a miserable girlhood, but the idea is so romantic.'

'I don't know if this helps your romantic notions, but my mother disapproves of her a lot,' said Felicity.

'Understandable if she stole your father from her – there are so many tales of how the father of the house goes off with the much younger nanny, leaving the good and faithful wife devastated.'

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'It was not like that at all. My mother disapproves of my stepmother because she is – what is the expression? – a free spirit? She is very kind, however.'

'If you want a wicked stepmother,' said Violet. 'I have one.' She got up from the table to find the box of chocolates her godmother had left for her.

'Really?' said Felicity.

'Then I do hope I haven't offended you, making jokes about it,' said Oliver.

'Well, when I say she's my stepmother, she hasn't actually married my father yet, but it is definitely her intention.' Violet came back to the table and took the lid off the box.

'Are you going to tell us more? The English are quite reluctant to talk about their feelings, I find,' said Felicity. 'But don't let me embarrass you,' she added hurriedly.

'No, it's perfectly all right.' Violet was wondering why she suddenly felt the desire to confide in these two young people when she had talked to so few people about it. 'Do have a chocolate. And shall I find the bottle of port my godmother left?'

'Maybe a small glass,' said Oliver. 'I've already blotted my copybook so much tonight by missing the party I may as well wake up with a hangover.'

'Oliver, would you mind getting the glasses? They're in that cupboard.'

Felicity refused the port. 'Are you going to tell us?' she asked instead.

Oliver had opened the bottle Violet had produced and now poured a small amount into the glasses he had found.

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'My life went wrong when my father came into money,' said Violet. 'I know that's not what's supposed to happen when an ancient, very distant relative leaves you everything. It's supposed to be good news.'

Felicity made a Gallic-sounding sound of dissent. 'Money can change things, cause problems. Go on.'

Violet wondered what made Felicity say that and decided she'd have to find out one day. 'In this case it meant women suddenly saw my father as marriageable material. My own feelings, which are probably very naive, are that you either want to marry someone or you don't. Your feelings are what matter, not how much money you have in the bank.'

'I do hope you're right,' said Oliver. 'I have no money in my bank.'

Violet saw him glance at Felicity, which told her that he was already smitten.

'Sadly, Oliver, not everyone is as high-minded as we are,' Violet went on.

'And . . . ?' Felicity prompted.

'This woman – we knew her, but she had never given my father and me the time of day, living as we do – did – in a large and very ramshackle house. But the moment word got round that my father was now a peer and wealthy, she came round with a homemade stew – she called it something much grander – offering commiserations. My father, who is perfectly in his right mind normally, fell under the influence of too much make-up and cheap perfume and – to be fair – delicious stew.' Then Violet laughed. 'It was probably

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just the right amount of make-up, actually, and I have no idea how much her scent cost.'

'These things are not always important,' said Felicity, sounding wise.

'Anyway, this woman spent a lot of time courting my father, who really is old enough to know better – he's fifty-two – and convinced him she was homeless and could she have a teeny-tiny corner of our great mansion to live in!' She cleared her throat. 'To be fair again, she didn't mention the great mansion, but she did say "teeny-tiny corner".'

'Reason enough to hate her, just for that,' said Oliver.

Violet nodded. 'I thought so. Anyway, it turned out she wasn't homeless at all; she'd just rented out her cottage. But by the time we found out about this, she'd made a cosy little apartment in the sunny part of the house and my father looked as if he might move in with her any moment.' She took a sip of port. 'And then, to make it all so much worse, my best friend, who I've known all my life, decided to up sticks and go and live in France so she could learn about traditional farming methods from some mad old man. He'd written a book that Jenny had read. She wrote to him saying how useful the book was and he invited her out to stay with him.'

'Good Lord!' said Oliver.

'Why would she want to know about farming?' asked Felicity. 'Is she a farmer?'

'It's not quite as mad as it sounds. He was a specialist in gardening and husbandry before people added chemicals. Jenny is fascinated by things like that.' Violet took a breath. 'She said she could learn so much

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from him and that looking after him in return was a fair exchange.'

She thought back to the conversation she'd had with Jenny. Her decision seemed so hasty to Violet, but Jenny insisted that now was the moment and she wanted to do something different and meaningful with her life, and wanted to learn from this man who had become a fount of knowledge to gardeners and smallholders.

'I tried to persuade her to stay, that she didn't need to go to France for all that stuff. We had already turned the walled garden of my house into a market garden. We used to sell to local people.' She sighed. 'I must stop thinking it's all still there. It's not. It'll be a mass of weeds by now.'

'If you don't mind my asking,' said Oliver, who seemed to Violet to have impeccable manners, 'if you are a market gardener, why are you living in London?'

'Apart from not really being a market gardener, except by default, did I explain about my godmother, Athene?' Violet asked.

'Not really,' said Felicity.

'Well, I told her about the woman—'

'Whose name is . . . ?' said Oliver. 'Not that I care about her but it's easier if she has a name.'

Violet made a small noise of disgust. 'It's Kiki.'

'Isn't that the name of a parrot in a book?' asked Felicity.

'It must be a nickname,' said Oliver. 'She's probably called Susan and wanted something more exciting.'

Violet looked at him gratefully. He seemed to understand. 'Probably,' she agreed. 'Anyway, when Athene

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heard about Kiki she insisted I come and live here because she was going away. So now I find myself in a very smart flat in the best part of town.' She paused. 'I'll get used to it,' she added. 'Have another chocolate.'

'They are delicious,' said Felicity. 'Charbonnel et Walker – I must remember the name. My grandmother told me that chocolate in England was disgusting and not fit to eat.'

Oliver shook his head. 'People are very snooty about the sort of chocolates you buy in newsagent's, but I'm very fond of some of them.'

'Me too!' said Violet.

Felicity shrugged. 'I don't know where these were bought but I think even my grandmother would approve.'

'I'm glad you like them. Anyhow, now my charming, intelligent father is being fed by the woman named after a parrot. At least she has her own apartment within the house. I'm hoping the rest of the house is too large and untidy for her to encroach upon.' The thought of Kiki, whom she and Jenny referred to between themselves as That Woman, applying her idea of good taste to the timeless charm and comfortable shabbiness of her old home was too awful to imagine.

Felicity considered. 'What was it that this Kiki fed to your father? I don't think we have "stew" in France.'

'I think you do,' said Oliver, 'only you probably call it something more appetising, like boeuf bourguignon.'

'Ah!' said Felicity. 'That's what stew is?'

'Not always,' said Violet. 'Stew can be disgusting.'

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She paused. 'I do wish I could say Kiki's food is disgusting, but it really isn't. Felicity, will your mother be back yet? It would be awful if she arrived home and you weren't there.'

Felicity looked at her watch. 'It's all right. She said she would be home by half past ten at the latest. It is only a quarter to nine now.'

'And I've already missed my party . . .'

'So we may as well continue having a party here,' said Violet. 'Have another chocolate, everyone. I'm going to make coffee.'

'Let me do it,' said Oliver. 'Please.'

Violet patted the sofa next to her and Felicity sat down. Oliver, who was apparently very at home in someone else's kitchen, was grinding coffee beans. 'So do you like London, Felicity?'

'I hope I will,' said Felicity. 'I don't like it much so far. Alexandra said I'd find nice girls to be friends with on my secretarial course but I haven't. They are not like me in any way.'

'But how many days have you been there?' asked Violet, trying to be encouraging.

'Only three, but they call me the French girl and sniff at my clothes which are so much nicer than their horrible ones.'

'Horrible?'

'Yes! They wear round-necked jumpers that make their chins look fat and hairy skirts. Sometimes with checks. And always a little pearl necklace and little pearl earrings.' She sighed.

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